

IDENTITY

in the Profession of Arms

By ANN E. RONDEAU

When we think about the nature of our profession and about ourselves as individual members of that profession, there are aspects that surround us as individual military professionals, and there are aspects that are inside us as individual military professionals. The former include *ethos*, *culture*, and *meaning*; the latter center on *identity*. What surrounds us transforms what is in us. Thus, ethos, culture, and meaning give us our identity.

We use the word *ethos* all the time, but it is well to think for a few minutes about the words we throw around. The etymology of *ethos* and *ethic* is interesting because the *e-t-h* in Greek set up the words for ethos, ethic, and, of course, *ether* and *ethereal*. They all go to a notion of the air around us, of what we breathe, of the atmosphere. As an example, let us take the word *ether*. In the old days, prior to the 17th century, ether was considered to be that space that informed and shaped the galaxy, stars, planets, and gods. It was a frame of reference for all that people believed in. Indeed, that then points us to ethos, ethic, and the ethereal nature of thinking. What is that rarified air around us in our atmosphere that shapes what we believe and the way we believe?

For military professionals, the air that surrounds us and that we breathe is our *culture*, and culture drives us to *meaning*. We believe in Service culture—Navy culture, Army culture, and so forth. Though we are all members of the Armed Forces of the United States, there are things that make each of our Services distinctive. The book *The Armed Forces Officer* uses the formulation *E Pluribus Unum* to depict how out of our several Services—and Service cultures—we have become one armed force of the United States. I am a Sailor, and from my earliest years in the Navy, I was imbued with and took onboard the culture of the U.S. Navy; it is the air I breathe—salt air, perhaps.

This culture gives us *meaning*—what it means to be a Sailor, what it means to be a member of the Armed Forces of the United States. For all of us in leadership positions, perhaps

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
<p>Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p>				
1. REPORT DATE JUL 2011	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Identity in the Profession of Arms		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
		5b. GRANT NUMBER		
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
		5e. TASK NUMBER		
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National Defense University, 260 Fifth Ave., Bldg. 64, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, 20319		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:		17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 4	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified		

especially for those of us in the business of professional military education and training, this comes down to what and how we teach, and how we learn, and how we transmit to those around us in our profession what we say, what we believe, and ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, *who we are*.

Transmitting belief and culture is fairly basic. How that belief and culture are then understood, interpreted, translated, internalized, and applied—that is, put into practice—can be complicating and complicated. Meaning is essential and significant both personally and culturally. Leaders set the tone for the culture of their organizations. Meaning of the community, no matter how defined, becomes essential for interconnectedness, for bonding, and for understanding. It all has to do with the relationship between the organization and the individual. What does the Navy mean to me? What does it mean *for* me? Meaning becomes essential as a reference point for integrity in all its parts and in all its definitions. Meaning serves to define authenticity and can be both the inspiration and an aspiration. Understanding *meaning* can also give coherence to our actions.

Leaders matter. And it is our leader, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, who has been asking us to think about what we have become over time. He began his time as Chairman by articulating a set of beliefs. Why is this important? Because cultures are set by leaders and what they believe, and what they instill in us helps mold us. Cultures are about belief. In this all-volunteer military and in this precious democracy, our people will draft or walk or march away from us if our culture and our beliefs are misaligned, misguided, misinterpreted, or misused. If we are not clear about who we are, how can the people we serve understand who we are?

When he became Chairman, Admiral Mullen clearly laid out what he believed in:

I believe in civilian control of the military. . . . I believe in preserving the trust and confidence of the American people. . . . I believe in holding myself accountable and others. . . . I believe obedience to authority is the supreme military virtue underpinning the very credibility with which we exercise command and control. . . . I believe true loyalty to our superiors is best

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demonstrated by showing the moral courage to offer dissenting views and opinions where and when appropriate. I believe in healthy and transparent relationships with Congress.

His beliefs, our beliefs, any beliefs are important because they drive culture, and culture provides meaning, and meaning guides behavior. As members of the Armed Forces of the United States, our beliefs, our culture, and our meaning are such that we—and the American people we serve—simply assume, even *know*, that we will sacrifice when needed, and ultimately, if necessary, give that “last full measure of devotion” that President Abraham Lincoln invoked at Gettysburg.

Admiral Mullen and his generational peers—I am one of them—were part of the Vietnam generation, a generation that perhaps lost sight of traditional military beliefs, or even came to abandon some of them. Having lost sight of our own beliefs, and maybe adopting some new ones, we were not in a sound position to positively affect the American people’s beliefs about and attitudes toward *their* military. It took us a long while to work our way out of that—and to win back the respect and support of the people we serve.

Ethos, culture, and meaning are matters external to us as individual military members, things that help shape, inform, and provide reference points and touchstones. What I intend to turn to now is that which is inside of us: our *identity*. How does identity influence and inform what is inside of us, how we act and behave, and what we believe? Let me enter this topic with a story.

When I first got assigned to Great Lakes as the commander for Navy training and accessions, training for both enlisted cadre and officer corps outside of the Naval Academy, I had a 22-day turnaround, and the move occurred a month after the events of 9/11. I did not have much time to study about what I needed to do to understand this new mission I was given.

So I pulled out from my library a number of books that I read in the past and that I decided to review, so that I could better understand the context of training, especially as we entered a period of war. I would focus on methodologies, pedagogy, and the science of learning. What was some of the historical context that I could draw upon from books I had read? I had the personal and professional experience of the Vietnam War era in my

Vice Admiral Rondeau speaks at NDU military professionalism conference



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own memory, but what had I read that might be useful?

If we contend that personal accountability is critical to a sense of ethical conduct, then we must also contend that identity—how someone sees himself/herself—is essential to ethical understanding. If we claim that we should own our actions, then our personal identity must be connected with moral responsibility.

It was that notion that struck me as I reread Jonathan Shay’s *Achilles in Vietnam*, Malham Wakin’s *War, Morality and the Military Profession*, and James D. Hunter’s *The Death of Character*, and other books, while in transit to Great Lakes. Identity becomes important—both in how we identify ourselves and how our culture identifies us. Identity is thereby linked to some social connection

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Soldiers return fire during combat operations in Kunar Province, Afghanistan



with responsibility. To be defined as a “professional,” in contrast with being an “amateur” or a “nonprofessional,” has implications for meaning, expectations, standards, tolerance, and qualifying criteria. We need to say what we mean and mean what we say as we link words of identity with accountability and responsibility.

For example, there is an ongoing debate about whether noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and other enlisted personnel are members of the military profession, or whether only officers are members of the profession. I find that Samuel Huntington argument from 1958 (that enlisted personnel are not members of the profession) to be a conceit of intellect rather than a wisdom of understanding, and not just an artifact of the time in which he wrote. I find the argument about who is a professional, and who is not, to be an interesting issue about identity, so let me act as provocateur.

There is something wholly undemocratic, I would argue, about denying that entire groups of skilled people are not professionals by some conceit of definition, when, in reality, we fully expect professional conduct from them and become incisively focused

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on accountability when anyone—whether deemed by some to be a professional or not—embarrasses the institution or otherwise violates basic norms of professional conduct and comportment. Why should any individual feel morally responsible, *professionally* responsible, to an organization if others in that organization define that individual in negative terms: that he or she is “not a professional”? Or, in another example, “nonrated”?

We Sailors talk a lot about things that are important to us, things that have always been important to us as Sailors and as military professionals. But circumstances change, and new circumstances pose new challenges and raise new questions. For example, in the contemporary environment, can we Sailors understand what the moral conflict is in close-order combat, the way that the ground Soldier has to understand it? Do we who do distance-firing truly understand the moral dimensions of close-order weapons and the effects of ordnance and of weapons that come close, even as close as knives? What is the identity of a Sailor in this context? What is a Soldier if we put her to sea? Does environment matter? How are decisions made when we are outside the cultural context, norms, and standards of the professional culture in which we have been trained and educated and that we experience? Is our identity as a Sailor the same as that of the Soldier or Marine, or is it interestingly, even significantly, different?

What is it that brings all of us military professionals together? What are the aggregat-

ing principles and desegregating realities? What is the common identity? We need to understand these matters as leaders, learners, educators, teachers, and trainers because they are central elements and key attributes of the military profession.

We are willing to discuss what we believe, but we are much more conflicted as to what that means—the meaning of that Soldier, Sailor, Marine, Airman, and Coastguardsman on point—because while we can say that it is tactical, today it is also strategic.

We must understand ourselves as *professionals* if we want to further this conversation about professional ethics. It is then that we can better answer Admiral Mullen’s question about what we have become. We talk about being a profession of arms, and we nod our heads that we understand what this means.

Yet I submit this issue in the context of our present age: The “profession of arms” has been encroached upon mightily by the ethics of the contractor on the battlefield, by the information age, and by what command authority is all about. How do we understand what is required in the profession of arms in the context of the health of the force? How do we understand the profession of arms as we train our good people to be effective and lethal warfighters at one turn, and then humanitarian responders at another turn, and strategic communicators at yet another—the same people doing all three functions alternately, sometimes simultaneously? We do so always with an

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expectation of effects and affects that ensure alignment with and allegiance to the ethics and moral principles of “the culture.” How do we as teachers, trainers, mentors, learners, and leaders ourselves put that across in our schoolhouses, our training environments, our commands?

So, to come back to my story, when I got to Great Lakes, I recognized that all the Services had been doing some interesting work, and the Army was doing some great work, but here I was, in November 2001. And there was confusion in most of our students as to what we—as a military and as a nation—were going into and what we were facing. So at Great Lakes we began to do things like the Sailor’s Creed, which has everything to do with *identity*. The words “I am” become essential: “I am a United States Sailor. I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States.” Note that the “am” (the identity, *who we are*) comes before the “will” (*what we do*). A creed connects self-professing identity and belief with the skill sets required for action. Reflection and introspection precede action—identity comes before reasonable and rational accountability. Professionals profess before they act. This discipline is older than the Spartans.

The moral requirement for the American military member today is exquisitely more demanding than that for my generation. So we talk about the warfighter ethic and the warrior ethos, but I would submit that it is no longer just about being the Spartan with a short sword. It is also not just about being on the bomber or ship that delivers weapons from afar, and thus perhaps not having the sense of what’s right and wrong—and the consequences of each—that the infantryman has. To what extent does distance remove us from our conscience, or challenge it, or make it work differently?

One of the realities that has always informed us in the past has been the level of sacrifice. Blood is the risk, blood is the price, and so blood is our measure and our moderator. Is that true anymore in a cyber age?



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Admiral Mullen emphasizes point at NDU military professionalism conference

What does that mean in the cyber age? How do we define the enemy’s will in the cyber age? How do we attribute cause in the information age and cyberwarfare, so that just retribution is exacted, rather than random acts of revenge being committed? How do we measure “sacrifice” and “violence” in these particularized contexts of warfare outside the short sword and knife? These are important leading questions that we have to ask and that are being asked of us.

Earlier this year, I was exchanging emails with my two nephews, one an ensign in flight training and the other a college graduate and philosophy major. The conversation evolved into a discussion about standards and conduct and about what the American people expect of their public servants and in particular those public servants who wear the Nation’s cloth. It was the philosophy major nephew who made a most interesting declaration: “So much is asked of . . . the military. We need to understand what we ask of them, and they need to understand what we trust. Do we establish intolerances even as we ask for more from the military?”

In his Chairman’s guidance for 2011, Admiral Mullen offers a partial answer:

As we advance these priorities within this guidance, our professionalism must remain beyond reproach. The American people and their political leadership closely scrutinized our conduct and rightly so. Respect for them

and for our oath demands that we continue to remain an apolitical instrument of the state. That means being apolitical in our acts and in our words, whether outside the ward room, on the flight line, within the barracks, or in the halls of the Pentagon. Over nine years of close-quarter combat has changed many aspects of what we do. It must not change who or what we are as a professional disciplined force.

Admiral Mullen has it right. The young folks are beginning to talk about this, and it is important for us as leaders and educators to set off on the mark. Who are we? What and who have we become? What do we do, and why do we do it the way we do? We owe this introspection and reflection to the young ones who wear the same uniforms we do. “Take care of your people” means more than providing them the beans and bullets they need to do their jobs and to accomplish the missions we give them. It also means providing them with an *ethos* and a *culture* and a *meaning* that will clarify for them *who they are*—their *identity*—and therefore *what they should do*—and what they should not do—in the demanding and dangerous assignments we send them on. They belong to the American people, and on behalf of the American people, we, the seniors, officer and NCO, are their custodians. If we do our part in forming them, they will surely do their part—out there where it counts the most. **JFQ**